Pam
Conf.
Drew
c. 1

C38 3

THEOLOGICAL EDUCATION
AND THE
WORLD MISSION OF CHRISTIANITY

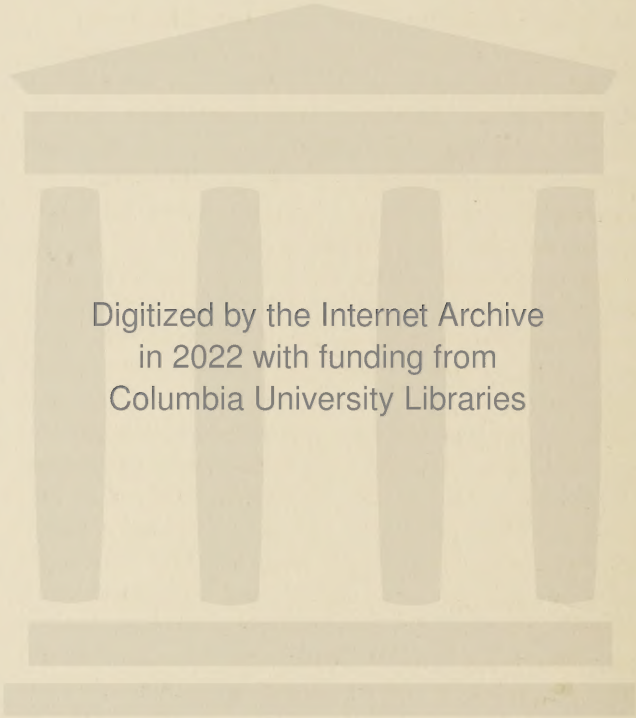
THE MEANING OF HUMANISM

EDWARD SCRIBNER AMES

MISSIONARY RESEARCH LIBRARY NEW YORK

CONFERENCE OF THEOLOGICAL SEMINARIES
Meeting at
DREW THEOLOGICAL SEMINARY
MADISON, NEW JERSEY
NOV. 29–DEC. 1, 1929

EXECUTIVE OFFICE
419 FOURTH AVE., ROOM 1809
NEW YORK CITY


Digitized by the Internet Archive
in 2022 with funding from
Columbia University Libraries

https://archive.org/details/meaningofhumanis00ames

THE MEANING OF HUMANISM

EDWARD SCRIBNER AMES

Department of Philosophy, The University of Chicago

IN its current use, particularly as designating a recently developing religious philosophy of religion, humanism means the concentration of attention upon the needs of humanity, such as relief from the evils of poverty, disease, ignorance, crime, war and various kinds of social injustice. Stated positively, it is the doctrine of the possibility of developing the powers and resources of human nature through more adequate participation in the material goods of life, through education, through coöperation, and through more freedom and creative effort on the part of individuals. Scientific method and social organization are the chief means to these ends. The present world is emphasized as the proper scene and opportunity for these endeavors. Other-worldliness is deplored on the ground that it distracts attention from these pressing problems and misdirects the stream of idealistic reflection and endeavor. The preoccupation of traditional religion with the supernatural is held to be wasteful, and to be preventive of the attainment and operation of a genuine scientific and practical treatment of the ills which beset mankind. While the humanist would admit that modern Christianity does much to alleviate the evils and to realize the natural goods of life, he would claim for humanism more immediate and urgent concern with these things, and a much greater con-

viction of their importance as the supreme and ultimate problems.

Humanists agree in their devotion to social welfare and in the cultivation of the various sciences and practical agencies for its advancement, but they differ among themselves in the degree and consistency with which they reject the supernatural and the customary forms of religious faith and worship. These differences are apparent in the volume, *Humanist Sermons*, edited by C. W. Reese and published by the Open Court Company in 1927.

In its broader, historical aspects, humanism began in the modern era with the Renaissance, with the revolt from the dominant ideas of the Middle Ages and from the method of Scholasticism. That awakening and development drew heavily upon the humanistic culture of the ancient classical world, particularly upon the literature of Greece in the age of Pericles.[1]

In the last seventy years, the scientific doctrine of evolution, the flowering of the machine age and the coming of the industrial society, have strengthened the faith and provided powerful instruments for the realization of the ideals of humanism. It is now just seventy years since the publication of Darwin's *Origin of Species*, which has had such far reaching influence not only in the biological, but also in the social sciences. It has begotten a new confidence in the possibility of making real changes in the natural order of the world which before that time was regarded as fixed and changeless. Man has gained a sense of power over nature through patient study of her secrets, and now is

[1] For a good statement of this historical process, *see*, Randall's, *The Making of the Modern Mind.*

able through intelligent coöperation with her to effect most surprising and beneficial results. He has increased his comforts, his mobility over the earth and in the air, his power of communication, and his capacity for producing and distributing the goods of life.

The achievements of science in understanding the physical world have been paralleled in discoveries with reference to man and the cultures which he has developed. Religions have come to be seen as phases of these cultures, and this view has been as fruitfully applied to the Hebrew and Christian religions as to any others. The enormous part played by custom, superstition, authority and rationalizations of traditional beliefs is made clear. Humanism has made the most of such discoveries and many of its representatives have used them as grounds for dismissing all Gods and the supernatural itself.[2]

The science of psychology has brought to light many facts about dreams, obsessions, auditory and visual hallucinations which raise vital questions about alleged revelations of prophets and inspirations of holy men. Recent studies of social movements, and of the cross currents in the contacts of cultures in New Testament times make it possible to place many events and ideas in new settings, and to suggest for them more naturalistic explanations. Illustrations may be found in the central Christian ordinances and in such ideas as those of the trinity, the virgin birth, the resurrection, and the immortality of the soul.

In its religious implications the position of humanism is not yet clear. At least there is wide divergence of opinion on important matters among those who

[2] *See*, Otto, *Things and Ideals.*

class themselves as humanists. One group emphasize the negative attitudes toward traditional religion, and regard humanism as the end of religion in the usual meaning of that term. They cannot conceive the possibility of religion where the supernatural has been discarded. Others, like Professor Sellars, in his *Religion Coming of Age*, make a religion out of enthusiasm for social idealism. Still others, like Walter Lippman, in his *Preface to Morals*, after a humanistic, or naturalistic, critique of traditional religion, resorts to mysticism in terms of the philosophy of Spinoza. Many Christian theologians find refuge from the perplexities here presented by turning to mysticism. Still others believe that humanism does not carry through the implications of its own position. These would contend that religion has always intended to secure the important goods of life, and that as a plain matter of historical fact it has sought rewards in basket and in store, in health and blessedness, in the conquest of suffering and death. Religion has sprung from the deep, urgent needs of human life, and has sought to achieve friendly and satisfying relations with reality. When only superstitious ideas of the world were held, religion used the ideas and methods of superstition and magic. When scientific knowledge was available, religion began to recognize the value of science for attaining its ends. In this view there is also the possibility of a conception of God which is not open to the objections brought by humanism against the conventional idea of God. This view holds that God signifies the ultimate reality of the world, and that humanism points the way to a conception of reality, particularly in terms of the social sciences,

which yields a profounder and more adequate idea of God than that to which, in most of its forms, it is opposed.

Humanism, then, may be regarded as a conception of nature and of man, which is in process of development. It has thus far stressed chiefly human, social values, and that largely in a negative way so far as religion is concerned. But a possible development of humanism points to a more thorough-going reinterpretation of all spiritual values, including the idea of God.

PRELIMINARY PAPERS

for the

CONFERENCE ON THEOLOGICAL EDUCATION

The York Conference Report.

The Jerusalem Christian Message.

The New Christian Adventure. Dr. J. H. Oldham, International Missionary Council.

Christianity and Secular Civilization. Dr. Rufus Jones, Haverford College.

Our Christian Task in a Materialistic World. Dr. Rufus Jones, Haverford College.

The Humanism Movement in Religion. Professor E. S. Ames, University of Chicago.

Science and the Christian Apologetic. Dr. H. N. Wieman, Divinity School, University of Chicago.

Moral Relativism and the Christian Ethic.

The Present Attitude of Youth toward Religion. Professor A. Bruce Curry, Union Theological Seminary, New York City.

Suggested Syllabus of a Course on the World Mission of Christianity. Professor Kenneth S. Latourette, Yale Divinity School.

Jerusalem Report, *Volume I.* (Delegates are asked to buy this. The price is $1.50 postpaid. Orders should be sent to International Missionary Council, 419 Fourth Avenue, New York City.)